

WINEMAKER SPOTLIGHT



Scot Dahlstrom
is the head
winemaker for
7 Deadly Zins.

MEET THE

maker

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KNOWS THAT
7 DEADLY ZINS
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AMERICAN ZINFANDEL—
AND HE INTENDS TO
KEEP IT THAT WAY

STORY BY JONATHAN CRISTALDI
PHOTOS BY CLARA RICE

If you were asked to name the number-one Zinfandel in America for the past five years, would you even hesitate before answering “7 Deadly Zins”? Not likely. As that bit of Nielsen data shows, the brand has practically become synonymous with the category. It’s also a poster child for Lodi’s big, bold, and rich yet terroir-driven style: The name references the seven old-vine Zinfandel vineyards from which the wine was originally sourced.

“Northern California is by far our largest market,” says Chris Summers, Executive Vice President of Sales for 7 Deadly, which is owned by The Wine Group (TWG). “Being from Lodi, the consumers there seem to have an appreciation for great Zinfandel. Colorado, however, is a big surprise market for us . . . especially the restaurant scene in Denver. It finished as the number-two volume market in the country for on-premise sales. And our Red Blend has really gained momentum, approaching 20% of [7 Deadly’s] business during 2019.”



According to Nielsen data, 7 Deadly Zins is the number-eight super-premium red in the \$11–\$15 category. For the past five years, it has also enjoyed its status as the number-one Zinfandel in the U.S.

But when a brand grows to such colossal proportions, it's easy to forget that the contents of each and every bottle must navigate a long journey from grape to glass. And, of course, there must be someone making decisions at every stage of that process, including precisely when to harvest each bunch of fruit that will then be crushed, fermented, and aged before finally making its way to the market.


In the case of 7 Deadly Zins, that person is Scot Dahlstrom, who didn't set out to become a winemaker; instead, he planned on studying psychology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, until someone tipped him off

to the enology program at California State University, Fresno. Dahlstrom had grown up around wine, yet his mother's attempts to teach him about it had largely fallen on deaf ears. His grandfather, though, had always kept Cook's Champagne stocked in the fridge, and that was "pretty tasty on a really hot day in Turlock, California," says Dahlstrom of the town in which he grew up.

With those early experiences in mind, Dahlstrom followed his instincts, and after two years spent earning his enology degree, he landed internships at Justin Vineyards & Winery in Paso Robles and Cold Stream Hills in

Australia's Yarra Valley. He was thinking about his next opportunity when he met a woman who was on her seventh internship: "She didn't feel like she had enough experience," Dahlstrom recalls. "I didn't want to go down that route. I was ready to start making wine."

A friend at Bronco Wine Company helped turn that ambition into a reality. In 2002, just one year after graduating, Dahlstrom was named assistant winemaker—a rapid ascent by industry standards. He was put in charge of white and sparkling wines, working primarily with Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, and Pinot Grigio. Then, in 2007, Blackstone was looking for a wine-

A man with dark hair, wearing a black short-sleeved button-down shirt and blue jeans, stands in a vineyard. He has his hands in his pockets and is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a slight smile. The background shows rows of grapevines with bare, brown branches, suggesting a dormant or late-harvest period. The sky is overcast and grey.

The vineyards from which 7 Deadly Zins is sourced all adhere to the handbook of Lodi Rules, an organization that, in its own words, sets "120 farming standard practices [that] help farmers manage their vineyards sustainably."

maker for its California-appellation expressions, and on the advice of another friend, Dahlstrom applied and was hired. There, he not only incorporated Gewürztraminer into his white-winemaking experience but also made reds with Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Malbec, Petit Verdot, Petite Sirah, and Pinot Noir.

A few years later, in 2010, he got a tip that led him to TWG, where he took a job as senior winemaker in its Fresno facility. But he and his wife, Kendra, felt the pull of the ocean and dreamed of living within a short drive of the salty sea air; a former Blackstone colleague suggested he look at Estancia

Vineyards, which he did, and they brought him on board.

After a few years on the coast, though, Dahlstrom began to miss the camaraderie and easygoing atmosphere of TWG. He'd never burned a bridge in his life, so when he dropped by to see if there was still room for him on the team, he was welcomed back into the fold. In fact, he was named head winemaker of 7 Deadly Zins, taking over from former Fresno State classmate Adam Mettler with the goal of continuing and even expanding on its legacy of success. "My plan is to maintain the [brand's] lush style, and to do that I'll continue

sourcing from the same sites, which are located throughout Lodi," he says. "My winemaking style has always been to hone in on and create those big, fruit-forward wines that the 7 Deadly brand is known for."

His first solo vintage of the flagship 7 Deadly is the 2019, which blends in a dash of Petite Sirah. He's also working on a 7 Deadly Cabernet, which is set to debut this spring. What to expect in terms of style? You guessed it: a whole lot of flavor and a whole lot of fun—which, if Dahlstrom had become a psychologist, would be exactly the type of wine he'd need to crack open after a long day at the office. ■■



Tasting Notes by Publisher **MERIDITH MAY**



Seven Deadly 2016 Red Wine, Lodi A mélange of spice and briar fills the juicy, round body of this blend of Zinfandel, Petite Sirah, Cabernet Sauvignon, and Merlot, which exudes aromas of ripe plum, blackberry, and coffee. Fig and clove season the mid-palate while black pepper marks the finish of mocha and oak. **90**



The Seven Deadly Zins 2017 Old Vine Zinfandel, Lodi Big, round, and full-bodied, with a heady array of deep, savory scents that include ripe plum, bramble, cinnamon, and mocha. Jammy spiced fruit packs a punch on the palate as boysenberry and salted plums lead to coffee bean, leather, and cedar. The flavor lingers on the finish. **91**